

VZCZCXRO3805
OO RUEHBI RUEHCI
DE RUEHKT #0595/01 1481158
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 271158Z MAY 08
FM AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8565
INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 6505
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO PRIORITY 6829
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 2122
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 4867
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 6073
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 2447
RUEHSA/AMEMBASSY PRETORIA PRIORITY 0140
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA PRIORITY 4195
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 3884
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 2075
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 3229
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KATHMANDU 000595

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/27/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [KDEM](#) [NP](#)

SUBJECT: NEPAL: CHIEF OF ARMY STAFF APPEARS MORE PRAGMATIC
BUT STILL VOLATILE

Classified By: Ambassador Nancy J. Powell. Reasons 1.4 (b/d)

Summary

1. (C) South and Central Asia Deputy Assistant Secretary Feigenbaum and Ambassador Powell met with Nepal's Chief of Army Staff, General Rookmangud Katawal, on Monday, May 26. Discussion focused on the ongoing political process, security preparations for the 28 May Constituent Assembly meeting and associated "Republic Day" activities, integration of former Maoist combatants, and the future relationship between the Army and a Maoist-led civilian government. As in past interactions, General Katawal's talking points vacillated between the uncompromising and the conciliatory. DAS Feigenbaum reinforced USG views concerning respect for democratic norms and practices, observing that violence and force have no role to play. No military coups, "democratic" coups, or violent acts by party youth wings would be acceptable. Feigenbaum urged Nepal Army restraint in dealing with all players, including possible crowd/mob action arising on May 28 when the monarchy will be abolished.

The Same Old Song

2. (C) General Katawal opened by expressing his appreciation for DAS Feigenbaum's visit and his hope that American diplomacy would help get Nepal out of a situation he described as "a mess, really a mess." General Katawal proceeded to reiterate his long-established boilerplate talking points questioning the validity of the election results based on Maoist intimidation and warning against Hezbollah/Hamas in Nepal. He then acknowledged that the Army would obey the orders of any civilian government, including a Maoist-led one, provided the Maoists fulfilled four basic conditions: 1) a public renunciation of violence, 2) a commitment to the democratic process, 3) a commitment to a free market economy, and 4) a submission to the people's mandate by adhering to the principle of "ballots, not bullets." While this last point is a standard Katawal catchphrase, during this conversation he amplified it to mean that Maoist leaders must abandon their military command positions, their weapons must be disposed of and their cadres demobilized. Once these conditions are met, Katawal claimed,

the Army would recognize the Maoists as a legitimate political party. Katawal did not address the likely time frame required for such a process, nor the Army's response to the fact that a Maoist-led government would likely be formed before these preconditions are met.

USG Views -----

13. (C) DAS Feigenbaum summarized his core message to all Nepali political party leaders, including that the Nepali people had spoken on April 10, and political agreements must reflect their will. All party leaders, but especially the Maoists, were being told that the USG was concerned over the systemic use of violence, and that all parties and institutions should shun violent activities to achieve political goals. Depending upon how the May 28 Constituent Assembly sitting proceeded, and the potential for large crowd demonstrations or celebrations marking the end of the monarchy, Feigenbaum urged Katawal to exercise maximum restraint lest "New Nepal's" first day be marked by violence and bloodshed.

14. (C) Katawal's uncompromising stance continued into discussions regarding the upcoming 28 May Constituent Assembly meeting and associated "Republic Day" activities. Stating that peaceful celebrations were entirely acceptable, Katawal opined that more violent activities were possible. The General dismissed government announced prohibitions regarding rallies around sensitive areas, including the

KATHMANDU 00000595 002 OF 003

palace, the Prime Minister's residence, and the Constituent Assembly meeting hall, noting that mobs could be uncontrollable and take on a life of their own. Despite this, Katawal held political leaders responsible for the actions of their followers; only they would be responsible should any confrontation with the Army ensue. Regarding detailed security preparations for May 28, General Katawal was either unaware or unwilling to discuss any coordinated whole-of-government approach, noting simply that the civil police and the Chief District Officer had the lead. Katawal stated that the Army would be stationed internally at various facilities out of direct contact with the public, but could be deployed more widely as circumstances dictated. He acknowledged DAS Feigenbaum's message on the need for restraint, but grew agitated when pressed on the Army's rules of engagement, repeatedly noting they would respond, even forcibly, should they be attacked, to include scenarios like civilians attempting to snatch a weapon from a soldier. Regarding the palace in particular, Katawal refused to make any distinction in his intended rules of engagement and force deployment depending on whether the King remained inside or had already departed the site. Throughout this discussion, Katawal repeatedly insisted that the weight of responsibility remained with political party leaders alone, but told Feigenbaum "you should have no worries about the Army."

A Different Time? -----

15. (C) Discussing options for the integration of former Maoist combatants, Katawal dismissed back channel negotiations currently underway. Questioned on these talks, Katawal initially hesitated, then replied that the Army assessed the Maoists had not changed and were simply seeking ways to destroy the Army through democratic means. However, Katawal also noted that the Army had made detailed plans for integrating ex-combatants and had shared these with political party leaders. (Note: Additional sources report that an Army team briefed these plans to Nepali Congress and United Marxist Leninist representatives on 24 May, the first time the Army has formally shared such planning with outside actors.) Katawal added that should the Maoists prove genuine in their intentions, the Army would be ready and willing to assist them, as Army leaders understood the Maoist cadres'

problems and motivations. Katawal dismissed the potential for UN support to this effort, stating that he was unimpressed with UNMIN's past role in the peace process. Katawal specifically stated that UNMIN had failed to apply the standard of "one weapon, one combatant" in their accounting of Maoist combatants (a frequent Army complaint), and had allowed the Maoists to stand for election despite the fact they retained access to their arms. Again balancing cynicism with hope, Katawal opined that Nepal's own political leaders were perfectly capable of handling arms management and integration issues internally without UN assistance.

Comment

16. (C) Although many of Katawal's basic talking points remain unchanged, his presentation suggested a growing sense of pragmatism. He spent far more time than usual listening to his interlocutors without interruption, and his replies were generally free of his typical comments about "drawing a line" and the Army's "demands". Also noticeably absent were Katawal's usual frequent references to his close personal consultations with the Prime Minister, suggesting he may be reconsidering the most appropriate focus for his loyalties. The decision to reach out to other party leaders on the topic of integration also indicated growing flexibility. Whatever the promise of long-term accommodation, however, Katawal's comments regarding security issues on May 28 are less encouraging. With no detailed, integrated plan coordinated between various security forces, uncertain rules of engagement, and an almost fatalist resignation to the course

KATHMANDU 00000595 003 OF 003

of events, including possible bloodshed, the Army will likely be one more volatile element in a flammable mix, rather than a locus of stability.

17. (U) SCA DAS Feigenbaum has cleared this cable.
POWELL